

## Article

# Contemporary Union Organizing in the UK —Back to the Future?

Saundry, Richard Arthur and Wibberley, Gemma

Available at <http://clock.uclan.ac.uk/10168/>

*Saundry, Richard Arthur ORCID: 0000-0002-7813-2148 and Wibberley, Gemma ORCID: 0000-0002-7827-8227 (2013) Contemporary Union Organizing in the UK—Back to the Future? Labor Studies Journal, 38 (4). pp. 281-299. ISSN 15389758*

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0160449X14527349>

For more information about UCLan's research in this area go to  
<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/researchgroups/> and search for <name of research Group>.

For information about Research generally at UCLan please go to  
<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/research/>

All outputs in CLoK are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including Copyright law. Copyright, IPR and Moral Rights for the works on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [policies](#) page.

## Contemporary union organizing in the UK – back to the future?

*Attempts to revitalise trade unions in the UK have had mixed results leading to calls for more radical organizing strategies. This paper examines a recent organizing campaign in the UK public sector which involved a shift from an approach which focussed on the development of rank and file leadership and worker engagement to one that prioritised member recruitment. The paper argues that a focus on recruitment is not necessarily inimical to union revitalization, but this depends on the extent to which it is used to develop new activists and to strengthen the ability of local unions to provide effective representation.*

Keywords: unions, organizing, recruitment, servicing, renewal

### **Introduction**

The scale of the challenge facing trade unions in the UK was starkly illustrated by the recent publication of findings from the 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS). The percentage of British workplaces with any union members fell from 29% in 2004 to 23% in 2011, while union members comprise the majority of staff in just one in ten sites. At the same time, the proportion of employees covered by collective bargaining has fallen to just 23% (Van Wanrooy et.al 2013).

Consequently, much union activity, and particularly the recruitment of new members, has come to revolve around the provision of representational services to individual members. However, it has been argued that an emphasis on 'servicing' contributes to the development of a remote and passive relationship between union officials and members, which ultimately undermines organization and the ability of the union to build solidarity and mount collective action (Nissen and Jarley 2005).

In response to these problems, many UK unions have turned to 'organizing' strategies based on developing grass-roots activism and leadership by building campaigns around key collective workplace issues (Simms and Holgate 2010; Gall and Fiorito 2012). However, assessments of such approaches in the UK are, at best, mixed. Although researchers have identified specific successes, any sustained impact on union density, workplace organization and industrial influence is elusive (Gall and Fiorito 2012). Indeed, Simms et al. (2013) have recently concluded '*that thirteen years of organizing activity has made comparatively little impact on formal aggregate measures of union power*' (163). Critically, it is argued that organizing has been undermined by an increasing emphasis on '*quantitative recruitment goals*' (Hurd 2004, 15).

This is not to argue that recruitment is not a valid activity or objective as part of an organizing campaign, but that without greater membership participation it is unsustainable and potentially counterproductive (Gall and Fiorito 2012). Furthermore, shifting the culture of unions, particularly local branches who have become trapped in a dynamic of service provision (Fletcher and Hurd 1998), is problematic. Thus in the UK, one explanation for the apparent failure of organizing is the inability of unions to sustain a radical vision which eschews short-term recruitment gains in favour of developing self-organization.

This implies a distinction between renewal strategies based on 'organizing', which we define here as approaches that prioritise the development of new leaders, greater member engagement and increased workplace activism, and those which focus primarily on 'recruitment', which refers here to describe campaigns that revolve around attempts to secure significant increases in membership on the basis of service provision. This paper explores the dynamics of, and tensions between, these two different

approaches through a detailed analysis of a union organizing project in which a 'radical' vision of self-organization was apparently replaced by an aggressive drive for new members.

Our findings suggest that counter-posing 'organizing' and servicing' not only offers little conceptual purchase (see Simms and Holgate 2010, Gall and Fiorito 2012) but also has no practical utility for trade unions. In the case examined below, the ability to provide good services to members by effectively representing their interests, both individually and collectively, was central to deepening worker engagement and developing organizational capacity. Furthermore, making recruitment the primary focus of renewal strategies is not necessarily inconsistent with the revitalization of workplace organization. The key factor is the extent to which recruitment is used to develop new activists, strengthen representative capacity and increase the influence of local unions.

### **The case for sustainable organizing?**

The organizing campaigns explored within this paper took place within the UK public sector against a backdrop of significant government spending cuts, restructuring and organizational change. This has triggered widespread job losses, changes to terms and conditions, and also the privatisation and marketization of services. Consequently, public sector workers face job insecurity and mounting intensification of work, while unions confront the challenge of maintaining organization within an increasingly hostile environment (Bach 2010). Although public sector unions have traditionally benefitted from a relatively stable organizing context, membership density has declined to 56% compared to 61% in 1995 (BIS 2013). At the same time the scale and scope of union bargaining has been radically curtailed with less than half of the public sector workforce now covered by collective bargaining (van Wanrooy et al. 2013).

This has inevitably blunted union influence and bargaining power (Bach 2010) and forced unions to increasingly rely on defending members' interests through individual representation and the enforcement of legal rights (Dickens 2012). Moreover, the provision of such 'services' has become central to union strategies to recruit and retain members. However, while an emphasis on the provision of union services may enhance recruitment in the short-run, it is argued that this is ultimately unsustainable and counter-productive. As the burden of growing volumes of individual cases falls on a static or diminishing group of union activists (see Charlwood and Terry 2007), the ability of the union to maintain levels of service for their members is called into question. This can in turn lead to member dissatisfaction and decline. Perhaps more fundamentally, Nissen and Jarley (2005) have argued that this servicing agenda has hollowed out union organization, severing bonds between union officials and members, encouraging passive and distant relationships.

In contrast, 'union organizing' seeks to move away from an emphasis on local unions solving problems for members to empowering and mobilizing members to act collectively to represent their own interests (Banks and Metzgar 1989; Fletcher and Hurd 1998). As Simms and Holgate (2010) point out, union organizing covers a broad range of strategies and practices that seek to develop local leadership encourage self-reliance and forge collective consciousness around workplace issues. However, they also argue that the notion of a unified model of union organizing is problematic, obscuring the variation of approaches and the fundamental purpose of organizing activity. Furthermore, the distinction between organizing and servicing is perhaps too simplistic (see also Gall and Fiorito 2012; Banks and Metzgar 2005), leading to a damaging and arguably artificial institutional separation between organizing activity and individual representation. Nonetheless, Simms and Holgate distinguish between approaches which are based on the '*political imperative of worker self-organization*' (2010,164) pursued in the UK by unions such as the GMB and UNITE, and those which are primarily designed to increase membership density and strengthen existing representative structures. Critically, the campaign examined in this

paper initially sought to stimulate self-organization by engaging and empowering workers and developing new leaders from the rank and file. However, this vision was arguably abandoned in favour of one which prioritised member recruitment.

In the UK, there is undoubtedly pressure on unions to give primacy to increasing membership as they confront the challenge of economic recession and austerity. But this brings with it specific problems. For example, there is a danger that unless the passive relationship between the union and its members is challenged and representative capacity extended, membership growth will place an unsustainable burden on existing representatives' workload (Nissen and Jarley 2005; Gall and Fiorito 2012). Perhaps more fundamentally, as Nissen and Jarley have argued, without building strong relational ties between members, it will be difficult for trade unions to develop an ethos of collective solidarity and mobilise to achieve key industrial aims.

Consequently it is argued that the recruitment of members should be a result of the development of new activists and a more engaged membership. This, in turn, implies that there should be a clear relational component to organizing activity, with attention given to building community in the workplace, creating networks of workers who interact with and support each other (Nissen and Jarley 2005). Thus, organizers attempt to make one-to-one contact with members and potential members to increase member engagement and identify potential leaders (O'Halloran 2006) as well as issues around which campaigns can be built. In this way, they seek to 'internally organize' existing members, creating a basis for sustainable recruitment (Banks and Metzgar 2005).

It could also be argued that the representational work of local union activists is vital in forging trust and connectedness between members and union. Within any successful organizing campaign, the union must be able to win visible gains for members, whether this be through defending them in a grievance

hearing or negotiating improved terms and conditions. This suggests that, as Simms and Holgate (2010) have argued, attention should be focussed on the purpose as opposed to the tactics of organizing. More specifically, this paper asks whether, in examining the purpose of revitalisation strategies, we should look beyond the conventional dichotomy between 'organizing and servicing' and instead examine the extent to which initiatives strengthen the ability of the local union to represent its members' interests effectively as opposed to simply generating a demand for benefits that can only be remotely fulfilled through unions' professional administration.

## **Methodology**

This paper is based on a two stage evaluation of a union organizing campaign. The campaign comprised of three organizing projects which were conducted by a large UK trade union in a number of different organizations within the National Health Service, Education and Local Government. It is important to note that in the majority of workplaces covered by the initiative the union was recognised for collective bargaining, however, workplaces with relatively weak organization within otherwise strong branches were targeted, as this was felt to provide a good basis for sustainable growth. In addition, a number of targets reflect structural changes within public services (such as outsourcing to the private sector) that pose a direct threat to union influence and existing bargaining arrangements.

The campaign spanned six separate union branches. In each project, three 'local organizers' (LOs) were employed for a year, working under the direction of a full-time regional union officer. Their formal objectives were set out in a Project Outline Document (POD). This formed the basis on which the regional union had secured funding from the national union and provided clear benchmarks against which the projects would be assessed. These could be summarised as follows: to strengthen union organization as measured by increased numbers of workplace contacts and stewards; to increase

membership density through recruitment and retention of members; to deepen member engagement; and to enhance bargaining and employment relations outcomes.

The organizing strategy emphasised the importance of sustainability – identifying and developing new activists while deepening engagement with workers by building campaigns around key workplace issues. The initial focus of interactions between organizers and workers is not on recruitment per se but aims to reconnect the union with its members, creating a sense of community at the workplace. Recruitment of members was seen as a consequence of stronger organization, as new activists are best placed to encourage their own colleagues to join the union and also to meet any increased demand. Although this is just one variation of the ‘organizing model’, it was the definition of ‘organizing’ adopted and generally accepted within the union in our research.

The method used in the evaluation comprised of a number of elements. Firstly, the researchers examined the original project outline document (POD) for each project, quarterly progress reports from each of the projects and available statistical data. Secondly, a tranche of twenty interviews was conducted within the first three months of each project. Interviews were conducted with each of the three project managers. These interviews were designed to provide an overview of each project and to highlight specific issues for further exploration. Interviews were also carried out with Branch representatives and/or area and regional organizers. Finally, the dedicated local organizers working on the projects were interviewed. Overall, these interviews were intended to: establish existing levels of union organization and influence; identify contextual factors that may influence the impact of the initiative; and highlight specific challenges and obstacles. Thirdly, these interviews were, as far as possible, replicated at the end of the project in order to explore the outcomes of the project, the key issues that shaped these outcomes and also discuss any lessons that could be learned for future initiatives.



Interviews with project managers, area and regional officers, and Branch representatives were conducted individually, unless they requested a group interview. The method of interviewing the local organizers was informed by discussions with the project managers. Where organizers had worked on a specific target, they were interviewed individually - however, where they had worked as a team across targets, they were interviewed as a group. In total, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 28 respondents. Thirty-nine of these interviews were conducted face-to-face - however, three interviews were carried out by telephone due to issues of convenience and availability. Respondents were given a guarantee of anonymity and approved interview transcripts. Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, although average interview length was approximately 45 minutes. They took place during the summer of 2012 and the spring/summer of 2013.

The interview data was initially analysed to provide an overview of the objectives, challenges and outcomes of the initiatives. A process of open coding was then used to break down, conceptualise and compare the interview texts (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Subsequently, further themes and sub themes were identified and interview transcripts explored and compared to provide further insights into: the nature of the relationship between branches and members; role of relational approaches by local organizers; attitudes of workers and members at target sites; branch engagement in the organizing projects; efficacy of regional and national organizing strategies.

## **Findings**

### **i) Starting out – the importance of sustainability**

At the outset of the projects, local organizers, project managers and also branch officers appeared to accept that short-term recruitment on the basis of offering specific benefits and services was not sustainable. Instead, by building firm organizational foundations and trying to develop greater activity among the membership as a whole, long-term improvements in membership density were achievable. The following view was typical:

*'...my firm belief is recruitment will follow, people will join naturally... where you've got a union that is highly visible in the workplace, it is well organized, people see there is activity... 'well I need to be a part of that' and that is natural, where I think forced recruitment doesn't achieve anything.'* [Full-time officer]

Respondents cited the development of an increasingly dependent relationship between members and union officers that resembled Nissen and Jarley's (2005) notion of 'hollowed out' union organization. It was suggested that members did not see themselves as part of the union, but rather expected representatives to resolve their problems when in trouble.

*'I think it's a reflection on what society is at the moment and what people think of unions and consumerism and it's the fact that people do buy into membership in terms of it's an insurance policy in case something goes wrong.'* [Full-time officer]

Thus, the emphasis on service provision meant that members felt somewhat detached from the union and that their connections with it revolved around 'quality of service' as opposed to deeper emotional ties. For example respondents reported that a bar to organization was a perception, among workers, that they had been 'let down' by the union in the past. Therefore, it was seen as important that organizers place an emphasis on trying to involve workers in issues and demonstrate to members that

they can shape the way that the union represents their interests. In order to do this there was a need for a strong relational element to build the confidence of activists and their trust in the union:

*'Any of us can just drop a load of leaflets off at a place and stay there for a day and say 'join this, it's the merit of joining it, good insurance at work', it's not about that, it's being patient and not saying those things. It's about building relationships, it's about building trust and instilling belief in workers.'* [Local organizer]

Personal contact and the increased visibility of the union within the workplace were seen as crucial in providing the basis for effective recruitment. Respondents argued workers were more likely to join the union if approached by workplace representatives or colleagues who they know and trust. In short, stronger organization on the ground will generate long-term gains in membership and density:

*'I think it's having that presence...I've got to get out there...it is visibility because it's one thing joining the union but you've got to be actively seen as well...because people will say 'oh I'm paying [the union] but I don't know who's what or I don't know who my contact is'.* [Branch representative]

This ethos was at the heart of the vision set out in the training received by the local organizers. In some cases this built upon previous experiences with either the union or work in community organizing and the charitable sector. Thus, when local organizers were interviewed at the start of the projects there was a strong belief in a particular model of organizing. The first stage was to map the workplace, identifying existing union activists and members in order to identify where efforts could best be directed. The next stage was to make contact with members and potential members through meetings or one-to-one conversations. The focus of these encounters was primarily to identify and develop relationships

with potential leaders, to increase the visibility of the union and to unearth issues on which workplace campaigns could be built. While recruitment could take place, it was not seen as the main focus of activity.

Importantly, while the view of local organizers reflected a political commitment to the role of self-organization in underpinning collective workplace power (Simms and Holgate 2010), branch acceptance of what they saw as the 'organizing model' appeared to be based on the need to address a growing crisis in representational capacity (Gall and Fiorito 2012). Although, branch representatives largely accepted that the creation of a more empowered membership who could be pro-active in collectively resolving their own disputes was a laudable aim, this was as seen as a long-term aspiration as opposed to a realistic immediate goal. In short, organizing was necessary to ensure the continued provision of services to members. For example, there was a clear concern that a recruitment drive, without a commensurate growth in trained and accredited stewards, could place an intolerable load on existing activists and build expectations which could not be met:

*'unless you start and build on the stewards, there's no point recruiting the members because...we can't service them now...so if we don't get the stewards,...we're going to hit a brick wall...'* [Branch representative]

To a certain extent, this illustrates the extent to which organizing and service provision are critically intertwined. A number of respondents pointed out that the ability of the union to deliver a 'service' – in terms of responding to issues and grievances – was crucial not only in retaining members but also in building a foundation for increased engagement with members.

## ii) Initial problems – a sign of deeper issues?

As the projects developed, the gap in perspectives between organizers and local branches in a number of the targets became increasingly apparent, arguably reflecting a more fundamental divide between the aspirations of the organizing agenda and the reality of providing effective representation at local level. The approach of the local branch is argued to strongly influence the success (or otherwise) of an organizing campaign (Heery 2002; Briskin 2011). In the projects that we examined, all the representatives that were interviewed initially welcomed the investment in organizing:

*'..when they suggested the organizing project which was off the back of, I think the fourth or fifth year that I'd put it on our Branch assessment in some way that we needed support, I was [delighted], genuinely as a Branch we were absolutely [delighted] because it sounded exactly what we wanted, you know people not doing the case-work but going in there organizing members, recruiting stewards and supporting'. [Branch representative]*

However, problems soon appeared as the projects began. In some respects, these could be attributed to poor communication and confusion over protocol and operational procedures. For example, at the start of the project, there was evidence of differing expectations as to the roles of the local organizers and also the time and resources that Branches could devote to the organizing project. The main worry that some Branches expressed was the extent to which the work of the organizers fitted with the activities of the Branch and their existing structures and processes. This became apparent in the recruitment, training and mentoring of new stewards. From the Branch perspective, they wanted to make sure that they were fully informed about the recruitment of stewards and ensure that potential new stewards had the right level of commitment with evidence of being prepared to become involved in

the life of the Branch. Unfortunately, organizers were not always aware of these processes and also felt that they placed unnecessary obstacles in the way of new activists.

*'If a person wanted to be a steward, they still wanted them to attend the branch meetings before...they just want to embrace the union, they want to do as much as they can ...get them to be a steward, mentor them, do a bit of one to one, because otherwise, they're going to lose it, they won't want to know, and they'll be thinking, well, why should I bother?...' [Local organizer]*

Fundamentally, branch concerns revolved around the centrality of service provision. Firstly, there was a worry that if new stewards were ineffective, this would hamper the ability of the branch to represent members effectively in individual cases. In short, organizing was a diversion from the core job of representing members. Secondly, there was a clear fear that the presence of local organizers would not only recruit new members but raise member expectations, creating a level of work which would be unsustainable if there was not a parallel increase in the number of stewards.

*'we kept saying "this has to be sustainable, whatever bar you raise, expectation you raise, membership you raise we need to have the equivalent reps to deal with it, we need to have the equivalent infrastructure to deal with it... how are we going embed the stewards, how are we going to get them in so when those people leave they raise recruitment and they raise expectations, we are up and running and we are ready to meet it." There was none of that, nothing, there was no support'. [Branch representative]*

In some respects the respective roles of branches and local organizers reinforced the distinction between organization and servicing which then generated cultural tensions between these two groups.

For example, as the following quote from a full-time officer indicates, branch officials wanted to ensure that any new activists would make a positive contribution and were fully committed to playing a full role in the branch:

*'the LOs [local organizers] saw it as, "Oh, it's the Branch, they've got their own little clique, they don't want anyone getting involved", or it's a case of Branches don't know what organizing is...but I genuinely think it's a case of Branches are stretched, and they don't want individuals getting involved who are going to cause more trouble for members or raise members' expectations inappropriately'. [Full-time officer]*

From the local organizers' viewpoint such attitudes were unnecessarily obstructive – and hampered attempts to revitalise the organization at the grass-roots. In fact, some respondents found it difficult to understand the position taken by branch representatives as the organizing project was ultimately designed to strengthen the branches themselves. In broad terms this appeared to be linked with a view that branches were pre-occupied with a servicing agenda as opposed to any real desire to revitalise grass-roots activism.

However, for branch respondents, the local organizers and to some extent the union failed to appreciate the daily realities with which they had to cope.

*'I don't think they've got a bleeding idea of the pressure that's on us at the moment...I think it would do them good, do you know, come and spend a week in the branch. Get out there and see what sort of pressure that's on us.' [Branch representative]*

Branches also feared that after the projects ended they would be left with no on-going input or support. Indeed, some respondents have detected some scepticism from members who are waiting to see whether the initiative has any long-term impact. In addition, there was some concern that the work of the organizers could inadvertently cut across their existing relationships with management within the targets:

*'...my own concern is with inevitably with any organizing, well, with any projects, they're going to upset somebody aren't they?...but in the meantime we're here and we've to get on with the day job.'* [Branch representative]

The sense that the introduction of specialist organizing teams was something that was being 'done to them' graphically illustrates a lack of engagement. Interestingly, a number of respondents suggested that there was a great deal of confusion over the concept of organizing. Moreover, while local organizers had received specialist training, this was not necessarily the case for branch representatives. Accordingly, there appeared to be a lack of trust between organizers and some branches, particularly where branches were run by a small and closely-knit group of activists. However, there was a view that greater emphasis could have been placed on pre-empting these issues and establishing clear lines of communication, expectations of roles and working rules at an earlier stage, involving Branches in project planning and design in order to secure buy-in from all parties:

*'I'm happy that they're there...I just think if we had got all that thought out and planned before and thought about really...how it would have worked we would have saved ourselves a lot of angst.'* [Branch representative]



### iii) Changing the emphasis - a new focus on recruitment

Despite these issues, when the first tranche of interviews were conducted, three months into the projects, there were some early indications of progress. Overall, respondents felt that the presence of organizers had an important positive effect, particularly in sites with limited union presence. In the first three months, organizers conducted more than 1,000 one-one conversations with members and non-members alike:

*I've been heartened myself in the fact that the [local organizers] have been so welcomed that people want to spend time, want to talk to them...I think it's because people want to have that relationship with their trade union, they want to be able to have time to talk to people...it's really nice to see people saying 'oh hi [name ] are you all right, how are you?' and there's a real social side to that, they can see that they can approach them with issues, they can raise any problems with them but there's a real sense of...camaraderie. [Full-time officer]*

Respondents reported that the activities of local organizers had boosted the visibility of the union and had started to create a sense of re-engagement with the union in some workplaces - making the union a 'living breathing, thing' as opposed to simply a source of insurance:

*'you do see the penny drop with people sometimes. If you had the rep in your department who you could go to with a problem, wouldn't that be preferable to how it is now? And it is 'oh but' and no one has ever considered how you become a rep or why the people who are reps are reps, they are just a rep who you go to.'* [Local organizer]

These activities were also used as a vehicle for recruitment. In one case, the organizing team held an open meeting on a key topic and invited both members and non-members. While everyone was able to contribute to the meeting, only members were allowed to vote as to the next steps. This not only represented increased engagement with the workforce as a whole but also demonstrated the potential value of union membership:

*...we're not just talking about union members here, we're going to be talking to non-union staff a lot before we ask them to join...we might have a vote...where the members get a card. So they [non-members] can see what they're being excluded from but they're there, they get the information but they don't get a say...so they think, 'yeah I want a card, I'm going to join because I hear what they say and I want to stick my hand up'. [Full-time officer]*

Recruitment was undeniably slow, however, respondents argued that a substantial part of the first quarter was used to map existing organization and plan activity and strategy for the rest of the project. In addition, the organizing teams' main priority was building sustainable organization and increasing member engagement in workplaces with a view to facilitating sustainable recruitment in the medium to long-term. Therefore, given the groundwork that had been done, there was confidence that recruitment would accelerate as the projects matured.

Despite this optimism, there was a clear strategic change as the projects progressed. In short, maximising recruitment became the new emphasis. One local organizer explained this as follows:

*'it was more about organizing, the emphasis wasn't on recruitment at the start, but it's just completely turned over now, it's get in there, get the numbers and you recruit'*

There were a number of reasons for this change. Primarily, there was some concern over what was perceived as a lack of progress in recruiting stewards and new members. Organizational flux within the targeted areas made the recruitment and development of new workplace representatives challenging. In particular, respondents reported that there was a widespread fear that being identified as a union activist could lead to adverse treatment from management:

*'...if people are under threat of losing their jobs they don't necessarily want to put a label on them to say union activist because if it comes down to say for [downsizing] when you're finding someone to lose'. [Branch representative]*

Organizers had also experienced significant obstacles in certain settings – particularly where work had been contracted out of the public sector and/or was spread across a large number of workplaces:

*'...we couldn't organize in those workplaces, they were poor targets, access was almost impossible, membership was incredibly low, there weren't issues to organize around. What do you do as an organizer if there are no issues to organize around?...we couldn't speak to people, we were walking around people's desks'. [Local organizer]*

Critically, respondents suggested that there was also a need to demonstrate to the national union that targets would be met in order to justify the investment in organizing and hopefully underscore future requests for funding and support. Moreover, recruitment was seen as increasingly vital given the large reductions in membership as a result of downsizing and restructuring in the public sector in 2012 and 2013. In short, the regional union had no choice but to change direction and concentrate on recruitment within larger workplaces in which access to large numbers of potential members was easier (see Simms, 2007). In particular, hospitals were targeted:

*'...in a hospital...it's like a real community...you'll be talking to a group of nurses and they'll all get involved, whereas if you're at Local Government it's more difficult because people are typing away, it's just one person at a desk, whereas in Health, maybe, you can go and grab a whole group of cleaners while they're round having a cup of tea or grab some nurses while they're in the staffroom'. [Local organizer]*

The new approach did not discard the importance of building organizational capacity or building improved relationships with workers – however, these were seen as following on from recruitment as opposed to being a base on which sustainable recruitment could be launched. Accordingly, one organizer referred to this as 'backwards organizing':

*'...we concentrated on [target] to try and get a quick hit, and try and get some membership levels up, some recruitment up...it was kind of backwards organizing.. [we] recruited and then organized'*

It could be argued that this change in strategy was driven by short-term considerations – a need to be seen to be hitting recruitment targets and stemming reductions in membership and income. Moreover, it was certainly seen by some of those involved in the campaign as a rejection of the more radical vision of self-organization on which the projects were originally based. However, the majority of respondents were more positive, agreeing that there was a need for a more pro-active stance. This reflected concerns that the original approach did not reflect the reality of the union's position or the importance of service provision in making the case for union membership and organization:

*I think there needs to be a balance... we're a good organizing union but we've also got to have that servicing model of the benefit of trade union membership not just in terms of you'll have a representative, you'll have legal advice...it's how can you save yourself money because at a time when disposable income is at an all time low, members, people are looking and saying right, my £20 subs could be my water rates paid, it could be my weekly food bill paid... so [union subscription] can go because you don't really see the benefits of it, so it's about saying to people if you're a union member you could save money, more than what you pay in subscriptions. [Full-time officer]*

#### **iv. Outcomes and impacts – sustainability and confusion**

A key question raised by the introduction of a more recruitment-focussed approach is the extent to which this was compatible with sustainable organizing. Interestingly, most respondents argued that there was no fundamental contradiction with building capacity. Even local organizers, who had felt under significant pressure to recruit the numbers of members they were expected to, argued that the focus on recruitment provided a clarity of purpose which had been missing in the early stages of the project. For example, one explained that:

*'It was not a bad pressure... [I] quite appreciated it actually... because stepping onto a [hospital] ward ...is a difficult thing to do if you're not under any pressure to recruit' [Local organizer]*

Indeed there is little doubt that the pace of recruitment increased with the three projects yielding 1,115 new members by the end of the initiative. Furthermore, respondents felt that while initial contact with

members revolved around recruitment, this did not necessarily affect the ability of organizers to identify activists or explore broader collective issues and concerns:

*'I don't think there's any difference...if you go to every work area...and you actually make sure you go and you spend thirty, forty minutes there...you will get members and you will get a Rep...I mean what are you going to do when you get to a work area? Are you not going to recruit members? Are you not going to ask for a Rep...You will do both...I think it's an artificial divide...in saying you can't recruit and organize or can't organize and recruit...the thing is to go to the work area where the employees are, that's the real issue'. [Full-time officer]*

In fact, the union claimed that the projects had recruited 100 new shop stewards and identified significant numbers of additional workplace contacts, health and safety representatives and union learning representatives. Most respondents maintained that sustainable organization could be built through a focus on member recruitment as long as interactions with new members were also used as opportunities to identify new shop stewards.

Interestingly, there was strong view among full-time officers and branch officials that the primary reason for members joining the union was for representation and support – moreover, in the current context this was tended to be related to issues of discipline, capability, re-grading and downsizing. While this may be characterised as 'servicing', for many in the union the provision of individual representation was central to advancing the employment interests of workers. The presence of local workplace issues was critical to recruiting new members and in revitalising existing members who had become inactive. But, in many cases, the union could only win (or win back) their trust by effectively representing their interests and making a difference to their experience of work and/or their terms and conditions. For example, the union benefitted significantly where it was able to step in to support and represent

workers who had been let down in some way by other unions. One organizer explained that another union had signed off shift changes against the wishes of their members, which led a number of workers to join the case study union instead:

*'they had been sold down the river by one union and we'd been kind of the saviour union... usually people just say to you, 'Sorry, I'm in [other union],' ... but here, it was, 'I'm leaving, give me a form.'*

It was also suggested that increased industrial influence was inevitably tied to increased density. Respondents argued that they had been able to secure facility time for new representatives and made significant progress on collective issues because employers saw that union membership was rising. This was explained by one full-time officer who had been able to negotiate key improvements for members on the back of increasing membership density:

*'...we were able to agree an increase in pay protection, which was absolutely key because it was worth thousands of pounds to individual members if they were downgraded...we were only able to do that because of the [density] of the membership, you know if we only had 50 members they'd say so what, but the fact that we've got hundreds of members that that they were thinking hang on, [the union] mean business here'.*

Simply recruiting new activists – without significant increases in membership density – was self-defeating as they would be unlikely to be recognised, have any influence with management and also would find it difficult to negotiate the necessary facility time. Thus, in the short-run, bargaining power in the workplace was a function of union density. Of course, it could be argued that without a commensurate increase in the representational capacity of local unions, such gains would be short-

lived. Moreover, it was essential that, having recruited a new member, the union was able to respond effectively to their needs:

*'...I think sometimes you focus on getting people signed up rather than actually listening to them properly about their issues....you just want to recruit them and then they'll never see you again....if they've joined the Union...then there's no-one there to support them...' [Local organizer]*

In this sense the ability of unions to identify and then act on the concerns of members was crucial to retention and to building a sense of engagement and trust. Importantly, this could not be separated from the provision of a service – in short new members had faith in the union if they were listened to, supported and represented. This could be in relation to a collective issue or revolve around individual protection in the context of disciplinary or grievance issues.

The creation of a target culture within organizing projects could put significant pressure on organizers which could lead to approaches which stressed quantity of members or stewards recruited as opposed to whether these gains were robust and sustainable. For example, one full-time officer pointed out that 'recruiting' a new activist was just the first part of developing effective shop stewards:

*'it's not just a case of right you're a steward get on with it, they need mentoring, they need training so the branches have a real concern that, particularly short term to medium term they would be adding onto what is already a busy case load for them.' [Full Time Officer]*

Furthermore, while the new approach had been relatively successful in identifying and recruiting potential new stewards, whether structures were in place to retain and develop new activists was less



clear. In particular, organizers were unsure as to whether branches were either willing or able to integrate new stewards:

*'One of our reps worked on [a health and safety issue] and she had been put in an awful position, she's firing off questions and queries and complaints to the branch and...just not hearing anything...crazy situation where we are bringing activists through, introducing to the branch and then things start happening but then they are being put off' [Local organizer]*

This in turn suggested that a key to building organizational capacity was to develop relational ties based on trust between new activists and the union – whether this be through branches or local organizers. Importantly, this was not straightforward – not only did the mentoring and training of new stewards represent a drain on already over-stretched resources, but there was an abiding concern from branches over their ability to service a growing membership while stewards were being developed.

A further concern expressed by some respondents was that the focus on meeting recruitment goals meant that resources were increasingly focussed on areas of relative strength such as hospitals and local government:

*'I think the current model anyway seems to have suited...the health project areas...there are tonnes of issues...people are closer together, geographically, the issues are more shared or at least you can see something going on in that department and that kicks off the fear that it is going to affect yours next, there's all kinds of threats...it's only sensible isn't it to cover yourselves...being [in a] trade union if you work in health anyway...I can walk into a ward in any hospital and people would be happy to speak to you'. [Local organizer]*

Full-time officers argued that strengthening organization in these areas was crucial as restructuring and job cuts had weakened the union's presence and influence. Furthermore, consolidation was seen as a pragmatic response to the challenge faced by the union – in particular, respondents suggested that the union would only be able to 'reach out' to 'difficult to organize' sectors from a position of relative strength. Nonetheless, a number of respondents (particularly local organizers) felt that there was a danger that the union could be seen to be abandoning certain areas and groups of workers:

*'I don't think...it's a good idea to throw all your resources into just you know massive recruitment in new areas...do think it is important that we at least try to stay covering all the workers...and that will call for different approaches...but it is just as important and you know I would not like to see, because these are more difficult targets maybe than get abandoned'.  
[Local organizer]*

Thus it was suggested that different approaches were needed for different settings with a longer-term strategy required in certain organizations. Moreover, in such settings, there was a need for more sensitive and nuanced evaluation of outcomes. Local organizers argued that recruitment should not be the only measure of success, and that generating other impacts in a workplace should also be recognised, such as encouraging representatives to be more pro-active, or improving workplace cultures:

*'...progress has to be measured so differently in somewhere like this...we did make progress...with stewards going to the negotiating meeting and letting members know and actually getting their issues across, whereas in the past they've been ignored and getting some things actioned...that is a big deal...[Or staff saying] 'Me and my colleagues have noticed that we're listened to more', and I think things like that make a big difference'. [Local organizer]*

## Conclusion

In the UK, austerity and public expenditure cuts have placed trade union density and organization under significant pressure. Furthermore, the erosion of collective bargaining has locked local branches into a dynamic of individual representation whereby a small number of activists are placed under increasing strain in responding to a growing case-load. This has arguably produced a dependent and remote relationship between union members, their branches and their full time officers (see Nissen and Jarley, 2005).

The union in this case study attempted to address this by implementing an organizing strategy to develop new activists while deepening engagement with workers by building campaigns around key workplace issues. This approach initially appeared to have significant benefits, with dedicated local organizers increasing the visibility of the union and in some cases developing the confidence of workers and activists. Local organizers, in particular, firmly believed that their activities left workplace organization in a better place than when they arrived.

However, the short-term pressure on unions to curb declining membership sat uncomfortably with the promise of longer-term returns that an organizing-led approach promised. In reality, there was an apparent switch from a strategy which prioritised the development of self-organization – prioritising engagement, empowerment and the development of grass-roots leadership, to a more aggressive, recruitment focussed stance. Moreover, at the time of writing it would appear that this approach is now being adopted for future campaigns. This reflects a common criticism of union organizing where the broader political goals of inculcating worker self-organization (Simms and Holgate 2010) are sacrificed at the '*altar of quantitative recruitment goals*' (Hurd 2004).

Certainly, a number of respondents saw this change as being a rejection of the 'organizing model' and a return to selling union subscriptions based on services and member benefits. This arguably exposes a more fundamental problem caused by competing visions of the servicing and organizing approaches. In particular, branches were generally seen by organizers as 'wedded to servicing' (Fletcher and Hurd 1998, 50) while local branch representatives felt that organizers had little appreciation of the pressures they faced in meeting the demands of members. Crucially, local branches saw organizing within the context of service provision and what they saw as the reality that recruitment and retention of members was dependent on them being able to provide effective representation.

Thus, although existing literature has long acknowledged that the dichotomy between servicing and organizing is blurred, the distinction remains influential 'on the ground' where the language of servicing (bad) and organizing (good) still underwrites internal discourses around renewal. This is not only conceptually problematic but underplays the importance of representation itself. In doing so it provides a barrier against the development of meaningful policy in two respects: firstly, it reinforces a cultural divide between dedicated union organizers and those tasked with providing representational services to members. Secondly, it can lead to a crude stereotyping of specific tactics – for example in the case above, a shift to a focus on recruitment was seen by some as an abandonment of true 'organizing' and a retreat to a 'servicing' agenda.

In the short run at least, unions cannot escape the centrality of representational services. Critically, the erosion of collective regulation means that opportunities to defend or advance member interests are largely played out through individual representation. At the same time, falling union density threatens to further undermine the ability of unions to influence collective industrial outcomes – in this sense, increased recruitment is a necessary condition for sustainable union organizing. Furthermore, unless

local unions are seen to be able to defend their members effectively, there is little prospect of building a sense of engagement which is arguably a pre-requisite for the development of self-organization.

However, it is not sufficient in itself – unless the representative capacity of workplace branches is significantly strengthened, the expectations of new members (often heightened by a visible union organizing campaign) will not be met, causing long lasting reputational damage and retention difficulties (Hurd 2004). Thus, it could be argued that whether organizing prioritises the recruitment of new members, or more relational approaches to stimulating grass roots activism, is important only in so far as it reflects the challenges posed by different organizational contexts. But within both approaches, the union must have the commitment and the resources to support the mentoring, development and training of new representatives and to provide a context in which strong, trusting relationships between members and the union, and crucially between union activists and officers, can be built.

Following Simms and Holgate's (2010) call to place the purpose as opposed to the tactics of organizing at the centre of academic scrutiny – if an approach which prioritises recruitment is simply aimed at a need to replenish union income, then workplace organization and the ability of unions to positively affect the working experiences of their members will wither. In particular, Nissen and Jarley's (2005) vision of a 'union of strangers', with members dependent on remote representation from full-time officers, will be realised. However, we would suggest that a focus on recruitment can revitalise union activity – particularly in workplaces in which there is existing, but weak organization. But, much depends on the extent to which recruitment activity is used to identify and develop new leaders, and also to mobilise new members. Critically, increased density in such contexts can strengthen union influence and bargaining power and provide the space and time for new activists to develop. As Hickey et al. (2010) have argued, union renewal is arguably dependent on the ability of unions to build or re-build bargaining power, as opposed to simply generating workplace activism per se. Of course,

bargaining power can flow from increased grass-roots activity but we would suggest that this will only occur if this is mirrored by increasing density and if unions invest time and resources in developing and training leaders who can effectively represent the interests of their members.

## References

- Bach, Stephen. 2010. Public Sector Industrial Relations: the Challenge of Modernization. In *Industrial Relations – Theory and Practice*, eds. Trevor Colling and Mike Terry. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Banks, Andy and Jack Metzgar. 1989. Participating in Management: Union Organizing on a New Terrain. *Labor Research Review* 14, 1-55.  
<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1136&context=lrr>
- Banks, Andy, and Jack Metzgar. 2005. Response to "Unions as Social Capital". *Labor Studies Journal* 29(14): 27-36 doi:10.1177/0160449X0502900402
- BIS (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) 2011. *Trade union membership 2010*. Retrieved from [31/07/2013] [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32191/11-p77trade-union-membership-2010.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32191/11-p77trade-union-membership-2010.pdf)
- Briskin, Linda. 2011. Union renewal, postheroic leadership, and women's organizing: crossing discourses, reframing debates. *Labor Studies Journal* 36, 508-537  
doi:10.1177/0160449X11422608
- Charlwood, Andy and Mike Terry. 2007. '21st-Century Models of Employee Representation: Structures, Processes and Outcomes', *Industrial Relations Journal* 38(4): 320-337. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2338.2007.00451.x
- Dickens, Linda. 2012. *Making employment rights effective: issues of enforcement and compliance*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

- Fletcher, Bill, Jr. and Richard Hurd. 1998. Beyond the Organizing Model: the Transformation Process in Local Unions. In *Organizing to Win*, eds. Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard Hurd, Rudolph Oswald and Ronald Seeber. New York: Cornell University Press
- Gall, Gregor. and Jack Fiorito. 2012. Union Commitment and Activism in Britain and the United States: Searching for Synthesis and Synergy for Renewal. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 50 (2): 189–213. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8543.2011.00855.x
- Heery, Ed. 2002. Partnership versus organizing: alternative futures for British trade unionism. *Industrial Relations Journal* 33(1): 20-35. DOI: 10.1111/1468-2338.00217
- Nissen, Bruce and Paul Jarley. 2005. Unions as social capital: renewal through a return to the logic of mutual aid?. *Labor Studies Journal*, 29 (4): 1-26. doi:10.1177/0160449X0502900401
- Hickey, Robert, Sarosh Kuruvilla and Tashlin Lakhani (2010) 'No Panacea for Success: Member Activism, Organizing and Union Renewal'. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 48(1): 55-83. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8543.2009.00743.x
- Hurd, Richard. 2004. *The rise and fall of the organizing model in the U.S.* [Electronic version]. Retrieved [20/5/2013] from Cornell University, ILR school  
site:<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/301/>
- O'Halloran, Lawrence. 2006. Relational organizing: a practical guide for unionists, Retrieved [10/5/2013] from <http://www.newunionism.net/library/organizing/Holog%20-%20Relational%20Organizing%20-%202007.htm>
- Simms, Melanie. 2007. Managed activism: two union organizing campaigns in the not-for-profit sector. *Industrial Relations Journal* 38 (2): 119–135 DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2338.2007.00439.x
- Simms, Melanie, and Jane Holgate. 2010. Organizing for what? Where is the debate on the politics of organizing?. *Work Employment & Society* 24(1): 157-168 doi:10.1177/0950017010361413
- Simms, Melanie, Jane Holgate and Ed Heery. 2013. *Union Voices – Tactics and Tensions in UK Organizing*, Ithaca: ILR Press

Strauss, Anselm. and Juliet Corbin. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage

Van Wanrooy, Brigid, Helen Bewley, Alex Bryson, John Forth, Stephanie Freeth, Lucy Stokes and Stephen Wood. 2013. *The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study :First findings*, Retrieved [20/5/2013]

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/175479/13-535-the-2011-workplace-employment-relations-study-first-findings1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175479/13-535-the-2011-workplace-employment-relations-study-first-findings1.pdf)